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ABSTRACT

The Vermont Outcomes-Based Network, consisting of educators from 10 school districts and the University of Vermont, is a loosely linked organization designed to improve instruction by sharing resources, especially for staff development. Network members have formally adopted an outcomes-based, mastery learning instructional philosophy holding that all students can learn, given enough time and the right conditions. A telephone survey was conducted to obtain a description of 30 members' beliefs and practices as they related to the network. Results indicated that respondents were wholeheartedly in favor of sharing materials, information, and moral suport, but were less committed to the outcomes-based/mastery learning belief system that purportedly drew the network schools together. Findings showed that network activity has enhanced professional growth among respondents, has increased levels of teacher involvement in inservice education, and has improved communication about instruction among members. Limitations (mainly the small and nonrandom sample) and unanswered questions indicate the need for further research. Included are six references. (MLH)

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A Description of Educational Networking in Northern Vermont

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Abstract

The Vermont Outcomes-Based Network is made up of educators from ten school districts and the University of Vermont and is a loosely linked organization for the purpose of sharing resources, especially for staff development, in order to improve instruction for all students in these districts. A telephone survey of members of the Vermont Outcomes-Based Network was conducted to obtain a description of members' beliefs and practices, as they related to the Network. Results indicated that members were wholeheartedly in favor of sharing materials, information and moral support, but were less committed to the Outcomes-Based/Mastery Learning belief system which purportedly drew the Network schools together. Findings indicated that Network activity has enhanced professional growth among educators, has increased levels of teacher involvement in inservice and has improved communication about instruction among members.

A Description of Educational Networking in Northern Vermont

Changes are stirring up the educational community in northern New England, particularly in Vermont. For the last four years a group of educational leaders from northwestern and north central Vermont has been working together on a variety of activities focusing on school improvement. They believed that by sharing human and financial resources with each other, especially for staff development, they could improve education for all students in their districts. The informal association became known as the Northwest Vermont Outcomes-Based Mastery Network, now known as Vermont Outcomes-Based Network. To date this group has had a dramatic impact on education in northern Vermont.

BACKGROUND

This region is rural. The Network member schools come mostly from Franklin, Lamoille and Grand Isle counties; one district is from Chittenden county. In a recent article (Hood, Ducharme, 1985) the region was described as predominantly rural with a recent infusion of people with an urban and suburban orientation. Farmers are the major tax payers, and they exert a strong influence over school expenditures. The generally fragile farm economy is cause for concern here.

Members of the Network have adopted the following statements of belief and practices:

- Outcomes-Based education holds that all students can learn what schools choose to teach them, given enough time and the right conditions.
- Educators have in mind specific outcomes they desire for their students and work toward those goals by making intentional decisions about instruction based on data gathered about the learners.
- Teachers follow the Mastery Learning instructional

process. This model of instruction, simply stated, allows for pre-entry assessment, cue-setting, initial teaching, quizzing for who understands and who needs more teaching. Correctives or reteaching are provided for those who need it; enrichment allows students with understanding of the initial teaching to take their knowledge to a higher level of thinking.

- Students are expected to master what is taught, but they are not penalized should their rates of learning be different from the fastest learners. Mastery is the desired outcome, not speed.

As educators learned more about this belief system they confronted provocative issues: Can all students learn what we teach them? How can we coach students to think by applying, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating, once they have comprehension of the facts? Must education be more like a horse race, with winners and losers, than like a growing process, with all participants reaching maturity? Staff development was revitalized as faculties grappled with challenges posed by this equality of opportunity for all students. Communication became a key ingredient; ideas required clear understanding by students, teachers, administrators, parents and tax payers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Commitments to the Network goals and practices have resulted in a shake-up in the educational status quo and have set in motion a series of interconnected changes. Regarding educational change, Kurt Lewin gives this advice:

> As people plan changes and engage in real activities, there needs to be fact finding to determine if success is being achieved and if further planning and action are necessary. (1948)

As people involved in the Network and its activities, we were aware of high and focused energy, of colleagues in motion and wanted to document the effects of these changes.

In undertaking this study our intention was to provide a description of members of the Network. What did members believe about the Outcomes-Based philosophy? How did they feel about being in a network? What had the Network done

for them? Did people care about the Network? What were some of the general feelings of members?

PROCEDURE

A telephone survey was developed focusing on three areas:

- Characteristics of networking
- How members related to the Vermont Outcomes-Based Network
- Some specific questions included: What had educators found and used in the Network? How had staff development changed over the last couple of years? What issues were of immediate concern about Outcomes-Based education?

The questions were based on research about key ingredients in successful networks. A question was formulated about each ingredient and generally made up the questions for the first two sections above. Respondents were asked to answer from some choices given, for example, the interviewer would say, "For the next eight questions, please respond by saying yes, no or I don't know. Feel free to comment at any time." Interviews took an average of 25 minutes each. There were 32 questions asked. Because of the focus of this paper in particular, results from only part of the survey are reported here.

Letters were sent to six contact persons (Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents) in the Network. These persons were chosen at random from the pool of administrators in the Network. They were asked for names of possible respondents for a telephone interview. In selecting the respondents this way, we hoped to interview the so-called "opinion leaders" among Network members. These requests resulted in a roster of educators, both administrators and teachers, men and women, a group ranging in age from 20s to 50s and with varying amounts of experience in education. There were 16 teachers and 13 administrators from elementary, middle and secondary grades. A pool of 30 people was called or an average of five respondents per district.

Discussion of the results fits into the following areas:

- How respondents show characteristics of networking
- How respondents feel about Outcomes-Based education
- Major themes derived from open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Networking

Respondents were asked questions related to general feelings and characteristics which have been isolated by researchers as being present in successful networks (Hedin, 1984). From her findings, Hedin reported that these successful networks have members who are committed to a new idea or philosophy. In addition, they feel commitment, loyalty, even devotion to each other. A sense of generosity develops and manifests itself in the sharing of personal and professional support given voluntarily. There must be a sense of equality among the members. Strong networks have members who demonstrate spontaneity, flexibility and informality in their contacts with other network members. The atmosphere of openness and sharing helps members to see each other as fellow problem solvers from whom they are willing to ask for help. Hedin's work served as a basis for the questions related to networking used in the telephone interviews. As Figure 1 shows, respondents in the Vermont Outcomes-Based Network have all these characteristics.

In reviewing data about the six characteristics, question 5 stood out as the one respondents felt least strongly about: feeling equal in skill to other members. Informal talks since the time of the telephone interviews suggest that teachers gain confidence in the work they do as they share with other teachers. One teacher commented that she didn't think her ideas were good enough to share, but since she started working more with other teachers on particular units, she sees her ideas are as good as, if not better than, her colleagues'! Teachers receive moral support through enhanced self-esteem as they develop professionally.

Figure 1

Characteristics of Networking

Questions	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Agree Not At All
1. I feel committed to helping the Network to be successful.	52%	45%	3%
2. I feel loyal toward my fellow educators.	97%	3%	
3. I have received personal support from Network members/other teachers/other administrators/colleagues.	72%	21%	7%
4. I have received professional moral support from other Network members.	52%	38%	7%
5. I feel equal in skill to other members of the Outcomes-Based Network.	34%	62%	3%
6. I believe if I have a problem with Mastery Learning I can get help from other educators in the Network.	76%	24%	

How Respondents Feel About Outcomes-Based Education

Commitment to the beliefs and practices of Outcomes-Based education was the unifying idea for the members of this network. The data in Figure 2 confirm this and raise some interesting related questions. Most respondents have incorporated ideas from the Mastery Learning instructional model into their professional routines. The instructional model is based on the belief that all students can learn given time and the right conditions. Despite incorporating its ideas, 58%, a sizeable number of respondents were concerned that this is an unrealistic idea. Further questioning about this issue could give interesting knowledge regarding respondents making changes in beliefs first. Also, further questioning could clear up uncertainty about learning disabled students and others appropriate for Individual Educational Plans.

In view of the somewhat compromised commitment to Outcomes-Based education (question 9), it is interesting to note respondents' nearly total commitment to the Network itself (question 1). Some degree of commitment to helping the Network to be successful was felt by 97% of respondents, yet 58% were concerned that its basic premise -- mastery for all -- is unrealistic. It appears that the idea of maintaining a network of supportive colleagues was more an object of commitment than was the philosophy which brought these colleagues together. One could surmise that the sense of openness and sharing, of personal and professional support, was more immediately comforting, and therefore easier to commit to than a potentially controversial and demanding belief system like Outcomes-Based education.

By wording question 9 in such a way as to make agreeing with it actually become a negative response -- to agree that the idea is unrealistic -- changed the pattern created by the responses up to that point. The 41% of respondents who agreed not at all that teaching to mastery is unrealistic was actually the group which supported teaching to mastery as a realistic goal.

Further analysis of questions 1 and 9 was done to see how the two groups -- administrators and teachers -- responded. Regarding commitment to the Network, a far greater percentage of administrators (62%) than teachers (38%) strongly agreed. At the other end of the scale, 8% of administrators felt not at all committed to the Network, while 0% of teachers felt that way. No teacher was willing to reject the whole notion of the network, and some administrators were. Regarding concern that mastery for all

Figure 2

How Network Members Relate to Mastery Learning/Outcomes-Based Education

Questions	Yes	No	I Don't Know
7. Have you incorporated ideas from the Mastery Learning instructional model into your professional routine?	90%	10%	
8. Outcomes-Based education holds that all students can learn given enough time and the right conditions. Do you feel committed to this belief as a basic premise of your work?	86%	7%	7%

Question	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Agree Not At All
9. I am concerned that teaching to mastery for all students is an unrealistic idea.	10%	48%	41%

is an unrealistic idea, 23% of administrators and 0% of teachers agreed strongly. At the other end of the scale, 62% of administrators and 25% of teachers agreed not at all that mastery for all is unrealistic -- these are apparently the positive respondents who feel mastery for all is indeed realistic.

This further analysis also points out that the greater percentage of teachers were somewhat concerned that mastery for all is unrealistic (75%) and were somewhat committed to the Network (56%): middle of the road choices. No teacher felt strongly convinced that mastery for all is unrealistic or felt not at all committed to helping the Network to be successful. Based on this sample, it seems teachers as a group had fewer negative biases and reservations and more willingness to work toward the vision held by the leaders than the leaders themselves had.

Major Themes Derived from Open-Ended Questions

Responses from the open-ended part of the interviews seemed to group themselves into themes of professional growth, involvement and communication. These themes recurred throughout the interviews whether the question was aimed at school visits, major concerns or staff development. Specific quotes illustrate these points.

Professional Growth

Many comments suggested a newly defined focus in the area of staff development. The following series of quotes affirms that, in districts throughout the Network, getting better at helping students learn has helped educators zero in on what is important.

> There is more communication among staff members, more sharing of ideas, more goal setting. There has been a positive change.

> We have more departmentalized staff development. It is no longer large group, 'take this pill whether you need it or not.'

> Staff development is more directed. We're not just listening to every new idea that comes along with no follow-up. Better choices are being made for inservice topics.

> Staff development has moved from the top down, assignment-based, to almost totally independent, teachers selecting visitations and workshops. There is strong administrative support if the work is linked to Mastery Learning. We are going to combination inservices, trying to consolidate so schools in our area can share among themselves.

The sense of focus has given teachers a clear frame of reference. The instructional process and the needs defined by its basic structure helped teachers to see what to look for and what to share. Respondents saw inservice as more useful than it had been previously.

> The emphasis is now on Mastery Learning. It's been a change toward more practical, small group work within the school. Inservice is need-based now.

> Now when I look at a unit, it falls into place in Mastery Learning format.

The same focus which helped educators to see solutions also helped to keep them feeling tension about specific areas until those problems were solved. Comments mentioned feeling pressured to solve problems about grading, enrichment, reteaching in alternate modes, pacing a unit to keep learners together.

Involvement

As educators in the Network started making changes, the level of involvement also changed. Comments indicated involvement and commitment were increasing.

> There is greater input from teachers in designing inservice activities. More of it deals with instruction and curriculum.

> It seems part of an overall plan to mesh with the district. There's lots of carryover from classroom to activity. They're using more people to carry out inservice.

> I hope I'll get a chance to share with other teachers at my grade level. I'll be having mainstreamed Special Ed kids this year.

> UVM and Johnson State are more responsive than they used to be. Their courses are exciting teachers, they are responding. I have taken a couple of excellent courses.
>
> People seem more committed to taking courses. I've noticed UVM is offering more courses in the St. Albans area. It seems like people are getting involved, and this wasn't just mandated.

Repeatedly, comments reinforced the themes of staff development and increased involvement. An underlying theme of improved communication started to emerge.

> I see a trend toward more teacher involvement, toward more specific goals, small group work with a single focus, toward more supervisory union level meetings. It's going longitudinal, one topic over time. We're making more use of University services (Homecoming courses, Master's Degree programs, School Improvement Institute).
>
> We've had the implementation of the instructional process. Teachers are becoming interested and are sharing ideas. Positive attitudes are coming out.
>
> People are speaking in the educational jargon of unit planning, instruction, etc. They are looking at the instructional process and planning and using it, not just sitting back and seeing what happens. They are looking at tests and at using the information constructively.

Evidence from the open-ended responses showed that as professional growth increased, the educators increased their involvement in the Outcomes-Based philosophy and practices. As they did this the stress level rose. Because the commitment was in place, the stakes seemed higher than ever that educators do an effective job of helping students to learn.

Communication

Setting whole groups of people in motion by encouraging change jostles the norms which have been in place. For some educators, very often for teachers, this is a threatening situation. One unnerved respondent confided, "There's

pressure to change teachers." The theme of communication recurred as these educators tried to pinpoint concerns in the midst of the change process. It appears talk about changes could calm nerves.

> We need more information about what Mastery Learning is. What can it do for us? How will it change what we already have?

In asking respondents for their concerns about the coming school year the issue of time, most notably the lack of it, was mentioned frequently by teachers.

> It takes an incredible amount of time designing a unit. It took two of us two weeks to prepare one unit.
>
> I always need more time!
>
> Time is a problem -- for paperwork.
>
> We have a whole pile of concerns! We're worried about teacher burnout in the system, about staff development across districts to slow burnout. We need to support out people. The Network needs some communication system, a center, a 'call this number' sort of hotline to answer questions. We need better communication within the Network.

Communication and the collaboration it implies seemed to be key in addressing these concerns.

As practitioners in these Network schools we often talk about the same issues that were mentioned in telephone interviews. In this case, talk among teachers showed trading of instructional units is on the rise. Teachers have said they feel extra good while delivering those units which took two weeks to prepare, as opposed to times when they have had to teach a unit pieced hurriedly together on the night before class. Teachers who are feeling extra good are not likely to be feeling burned out.

Another communication issue mentioned was teacher isolation. One administrator felt so strongly about teacher isolation, he saw major changes ahead to improve communication.

> Mastery Learning requires the reorganization of schools so teachers can team together to solve educational problems. We need to get away from what I call the Fort Apache approach. We need to change the way we do business inside schools, be planful about reorganization....

The image of the teacher isolated behind the high walls of Fort Apache suggests someone not able to interact with the outside, someone in no position to collaborate. Research about inservice verifies that the most successful training happens when teachers can benefit from feedback and coaching from someone with whom they collaborate (Joyce and Showers, 1980). This requires teaming of some sort.

Communication among educators will not be enough. An administrator warned that we must inform the public.

> We need to bring communities along so they don't feel left out. There may be some bitterness about changes to Outcomes-Based procedures, so we have to tell them about the big picture. Often we seem to be painting the big picture as we go along, and we don't have time to stand back and present it to the community.

Another administrator saw the same power of information, with the staff and in the community, preventing fear as changes in the schools occur:

> I'm concerned about having the staff feel comfortable with Outcomes-Based instruction, but also about keeping the community informed about what we're doing. The terms "Mastery Learning" and "Outcomes-Based" scare people. It's all just good teaching.

Negative Comments and Criticism

Even in this mostly positive sample of educators from the Network, there were negative feelings. There were three targets: Outcomes-Based/Mastery Learning, school administrations and the Network, itself. One teacher had reservations about the effectiveness of the Mastery Learning instructional model:

> What are the effects of Mastery Learning? Will test scores stay high in subsequent years? What about the slow kids? Because they take a long time to learn

> math facts, they'll never get to geometry, fractions, measurement.

Two teachers reported feeling coerced to adopt the Outcomes-Based philosophy and felt they spoke for other teachers as well:

> There has been too much, too soon. There has not been enough preparation. Teachers have negative attitudes. They feel it has been thrown at them.
>
> I am concerned that this is a fait accompli. It was crammed down our throats. How it was done has turned some people off to any part of it. Our administration is very committed. We, as teachers, are vulnerable, but as our superintendent told us, we can't be afraid to try.

The third target of negativity was the Network. Administrators made the following assessment of it:

> The Network does not meet my needs, but it has been good for some teachers.
>
> If it's going to work, the Network must reevaluate itself, where it is, where it wants to go. Schools move at different paces and therefore have different needs. The Network has tried to move faster than it is able.

DISCUSSION

The fact that rural schools spread out over a large area have joined forces in overcoming financial disadvantages exemplifies the indomitable spirit of Vermont educators. Mere inconvenience will not stop these professionals from achieving their goals. Staff developers in this group of educators have seen the value in an instructional process which does not meet with approval on all sides, yet they press on. Teachers have said the Mastery Learning instructional process has helped them to become better, to feel better, to see units fall into place more easily and, most importantly, to see their students achieve mastery of the material they teach. Staff developers see enough evidence that this instructional

process helps good teachers to become better teachers that they are willing to put in the time and energy to persevere, despite voices of dissent.

It would be a mistake for leaders in this network to ignore those voices of dissent. From challenging dialogue can come the most significant improvements. An organization predicated on the exchange of information, as this one is, must be ready to receive negative feedback and to process it for whatever value it may hold. By seeking out the opinion leaders of the group to be respondents, results from the study point out the presence of a group of teachers who have questions. They want information about effects of Mastery Learning, they do not want "too much, too fast." Some feel "vulnerable." There is a clear need for inservice with a heavy emphasis on good communication and mutual support among teachers and administrators. The ability to deliver improved inservice is a strength of this network, therefore it may be just a matter of time before these concerns are met.

Whether or not every member of this network is committed to the Mastery Learning process, each person has in other Network members loyal coworkers with whom they can feel free to solve educational problems. There is clear evidence that this is a group committed to each other and to the jobs they do. Interestingly, their commitment is not as strong to the Network which draws them together for the first time, as it is to each other as professionals. Isolation does not appear to be a threat to these respondents, as evidenced by this sense of loyalty and willingness to seek help from each other.

By asking about members' beliefs and practices, Network members emerge as committed professionals who are trying to improve learning for students by participating in newly revitalized staff inservice. Professional growth and involvement by teachers seem on the rise and with it are reports of enhanced self-esteem. The thread of communication seems ubiquitous.

Communication seems to comprise both the source of frustration and the source of the unifying strength of this network. Should the norm of continued communication among teachers and in inservice for these educators continue, it can be predicted that the frustrations vented by the critics within the Network will be met head-on and dealt with as either constructive ideas to improve education or as

symptoms of anxiety to be put to rest by experience with the instructional model. Effective communication can ease frustration. At the same time, those members who do communicate successfully with other Network members will be sharing ideas and materials for the betterment of instruction for students.

LIMITATIONS

It must be granted that the telephone interview study has some limitations: There were only 30 respondents, and the names of those respondents were supplied by their superintendents. In contacting these opinion leaders the sample of respondents was not a random sample or necessarily representative of all people in the Network; however, these opinion leaders were more likely to be informed about Network activities, and to have more perceptive reactions than randomly selected members.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The interviews conducted in this survey of educational network members have raised many questions which invite further research:

- Do teachers change beliefs before they change practices or do they generally change practices before beliefs?
- In changing practices do people 1) reshape existing practices, 2) drop old parts and add new parts, or 3) live with a conflicting duality (believing one philosophy and acting by another)? What are the patterns?
- When change is dictated at the Superintendent's level, in what various ways are building level leaders affected as they effect change among teachers?
- What happens when someone belongs to a network and does not subscribe to its guiding philosophy?

- In what ways can internal conflicts like the issue of time be dealt with successfully?
- Have levels of skepticism toward Outcomes-Based/Mastery Learning changed within this network?
- Have levels of support for networking changed?

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